nature net

A newsletter of Nature Kenya-The EANHS **February 2023**

An aerial view of the Sabaki River Mouth in Kilifi County. Photo NK Archives

The wetlands of Kenya

By Caroline Chebet and John Mwacharo

The early morning's sun rays gleam against the shiny mangrove leaves along the shores of Sabaki River Mouth, where the Athi-Galana-Sabaki River pours into the Indian Ocean. For nature lovers, Sabaki River Mouth is a haven of biodiversity. But for private developers who have lately been eyeing this ecologically sensitive area, it is a vast wasteland.

On February 2, we mark World Wetlands Day, a day to appreciate the importance of wetlands and advocate for their conservation. Many wetlands in Kenya, including the Sabaki River Mouth, face increasing pressure from human activity. The majority of wetlands lack formal protection, except for the few that fall in protected areas. With the current lack of institutional management and formal protection, these wetlands are at the mercy of developers and potential loss of these delicate ecosystems and the invaluable ecological services they provide.

Wetlands are amongst the most productive ecosystems on earth. They filter water, store carbon, regulate floods and control soil erosion. They provide water, food, pasture and raw materials for people and their livestock. From the Yala Swamp in western Kenya to Lake Ol' Bolossat in Central Kenya and the seasonal wetlands of Dakatcha Woodlands in Kilifi, these habitats host many bird, fish, mammal, plant, reptile, amphibian, crustacean and insect species – some of them found nowhere else.

Encroachment, land use change, pollution and habitat destruction top the list of threats wetlands in Kenya face. The fact that many of these wetlands lie on private land further complicates their conservation. A lack of awareness of their importance has seen the conversion of wetlands on private land to farmlands and real estate developments. Those on community land have not been spared from destruction. Wetlands, especially seasonal wetlands, are not usually recognized in land allocation, and are not set aside for community use or conservation.

Yala Swamp is Kenya's largest freshwater wetland. The swamp directly supports many communities with water, fish, firewood and raw materials. Yala Swamp also plays a critical ecological role in filtering water flowing into Lake Victoria. Currently, Yala Swamp is facing imminent destruction following a decision by the National Land Commission (NLC) to allocate 6,763.74 ha of the wetland to Lake Agro Kenya Limited for commercial farming. Local communities and conservation stakeholders have voiced outrage over the controversial allocation by NLC.

The recently documented fish deaths in Lake Victoria were attributed to pollution. Communities around the lake depend on fishing for livelihoods. Chemical and fertilizer load from farmlands and reduced acreage of papyrus to filters these chemicals, has enhanced the spread of the invasive water hyacinth, negatively impacting fishing.

In Lake Nakuru, unsustainable agricultural practices, deforestation and uncontrolled abstraction of water in the catchment, and pollution and encroachment by human settlements from the city, threaten the wetland's fragile ecosystem – once known as the greatest ornithological spectacle on Earth.

All is not gloom, though. Nature Kenya is working with local communities, county governments and other stakeholders to conserve wetlands in the country. At the Tana River Delta, a land use plan was collaboratively developed to guide the management of land and natural resources for

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LUNGS FOR KENYA
13TH CHARITY GOLF TOURNAMENT
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The wetlands of Kenya

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various uses, including conservation. Nature Kenya is promoting the Indigenous and Community Conservation Areas (ICCAs) approach at the Delta. The ICCAs are biodiversity-rich conservancies based on traditional, cultural, and multiple land use under the management of local communities.

A land use plan for Yala Delta (which includes the Swamp) has also been developed. The land use plan seeks to put the use, development, management and conservation of Yala Swamp on a sustainable footing.

Nature Kenya works with local conservation groups that serve as Site Support Groups (SSGs) for Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs), which include wetlands. The community groups are engaged in site restoration, monitoring, advocacy, environmental education and awareness creation, and promotion of sustainable livelihood activities. The SSGs are active in Yala Swamp, Tana River Delta, Lake Bogoria, Lake Naivasha, Lake Ol' Bolossat, Mida Creek, Lake Elmenteita, Sabaki River Mouth and Dunga Swamp.

Government recognition of water, biodiversity and tourism as valid land uses would go a long way in saving these critical resources.

KBA in Focus: Sabaki River Mouth

By Joshua Sese

The Athi-Galana-Sabaki River is the second longest and one of the two perennial rivers draining into the Indian Ocean in Kenya. The Sabaki River Mouth (SRM) - where the Athi-Galana-Sabaki River pours into the Indian Ocean north of Malindi town in Kilifi County - is an estuary with sandbanks, mudflats, dunes, freshwater pools, marshes and mangroves, presenting a unique ecosystem and habitat for diverse flora and fauna.

Sabaki River Mouth is among the 67 designated Important Bird Areas (IBAs) and Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) in Kenya. An important habitat for resident and migratory shorebirds, the estuary is home to over 240 bird species. The estuary's turbid coastal waters are an important nursery ground for crustaceans and fish, while its sandy shores on both sides are breeding grounds for turtles. Different species of mangroves dominate its peripheral mudflats. Crocodiles, hippos and antelopes also live in the area.

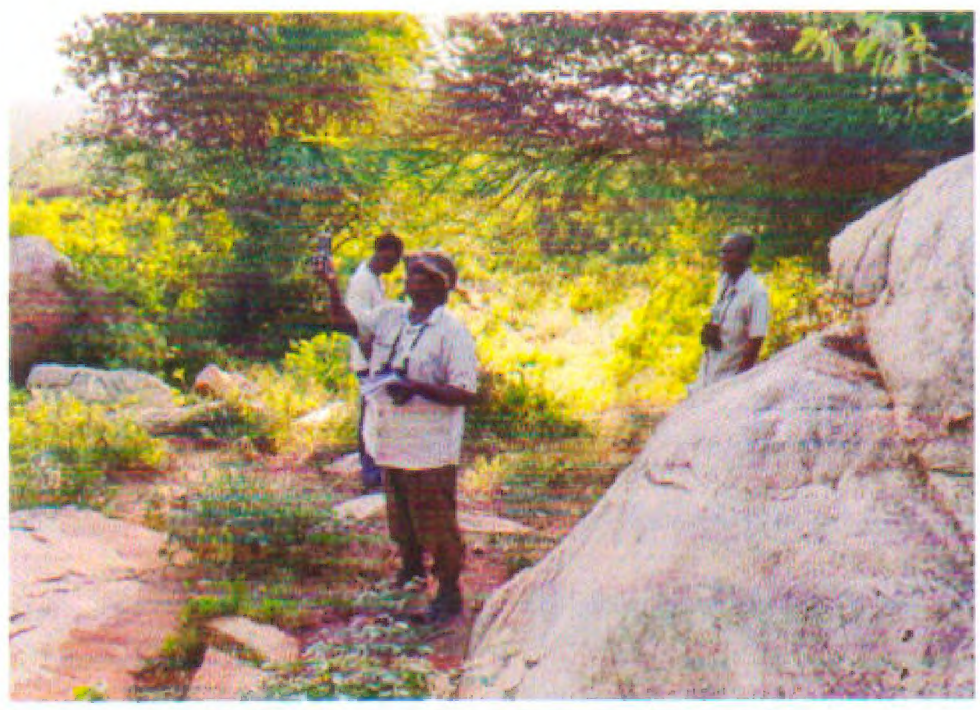
The estuary provides vital ecosystem services beneficial to people, like filtering pollutants and acting as a storm buffer. It is a source of livelihood for the local communities. Fishing and ecotourism are among the livelihood activities the communities are engaged in.

Despite its invaluable ecological and economic importance, Sabaki River Mouth faces many hazards, including sand harvesting, fishing with illegal gear, illegal mangrove pole harvesting, discharge of solid waste and effluent, encroachment and land grabbing. These threats impact water quality, biodiversity and vegetation, disrupting the estuary's ecosystem.

A number of conservation actions are underway to safeguard the Sabaki River Mouth. They include the development of the River Sabaki Estuary Management Plan 2022-2032 led by the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) in collaboration the Kilifi County Government, Nature Kenya, and other stakeholders. The Sabaki River Conservation and Development Organization (SARICODO) – site support group (SSG) for Sabaki River Mouth – conducts annual waterbird counts in partnership with A Rocha Kenya and the National Museums of Kenya. SARICODO is also engaged in mangrove restoration and environmental awareness creation. Volunteers from the group regularly patrol the estuary for illegal activities.

Conservation News

Namunyak Women's Group in Maasai Mara take delivery of 30 beehives from Nature Kenya. Beekeeping is one of the community livelihood activities Nature Kenya is promoting in the area. Photo by F. Muli



Members of Mutitu Site Support Group conduct a bird monitoring exercise at Mutitu Forest in Kitui County. Photo by P. Kulalya

Community members harvest grass seeds in Witu, Tana River Delta. The grass seeds will be planted in degraded pasture lands as part of an ongoing landscape restoration initiative in the Delta. Photo by G. Odera

For updates visit
www.naturekenya.org

EDITORIAL TEAM
Fleur Ng'weno, Angela Mecha, Richard Kipngeno and John Mwacharo

LAYOUT
John Mwacharo

FRONT BANNER
Lorenzo Barelli

NatureKenya
THE EAST AFRICA NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY
Nature-Kenya @Nature_Kenya
nature_kenya Nature Kenya

For contributions, advertising and subscriptions, contact us by:
Post: P. O. Box 44486 GPO, Nairobi
Telephone: 020 3537568/0780149200/0751624312/ 0771343138
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Waterbird Counts

By Richard Kipngeno

The 2023 January Waterbird counts had an exciting start in Nairobi and some Rift Valley lakes. It's an annual monitoring activity to collect information on the number of waterbirds in wetlands, indicating the health of the wetlands. The counts are coordinated by the National Museums of Kenya, Kenya Wildlife Service and Nature Kenya, with support from Wetlands International and others, and conducted by groups of volunteers.

Armed with binoculars, telescopes and data sheets, the volunteers were up to the task at the break of dawn or soon after, and carried on past midday. The bird counters endured a mix of landscapes ranging from rugged and dusty terrains to wet and muddy ones, bitter cold nights and scorching daytime sun.

Wetlands are home to other wild animals besides birds. In some sites, counters had to improvise safer offshore routes to avoid disturbing sunbathing hippos and crocodiles, keenly noting the number of birds keeping these giants company. These unusual encounters added an aura of adventure to the counts.

Sites covered in January included Manguo Ponds (almost dry), Dandora Sewage Works (Nairobi Oxygenation Ponds, Ruai), Nairobi National Park and Langata wetlands, Lake Ol'Bolossat, Lake Bogoria, Lake Baringo, and Lakes Naivasha, Sonachi and Oloidien. A Southern Ground Hornbill welcomed us at Hippo Camp in Naivasha, ushering in a successful count.

Lakes Nakuru, Elmenteita, and perhaps Magadi; Thika Sewage works; Coastal sites; and a few sites north of Nairobi will be counted in February. We thank our members, volunteers and partners for their participation.

Volunteers (top left and bottom) participate in the January 2023 waterbird counts at various sites. A Yellow-billed Stork (top right) and Little Grebes. Photos H. Okoth, P. Usher and C. Jemimah

Comet passing by

By Fleur Ng'weno

Comet ZTF (C/2022 E3) passes near Earth on February 1st. Comets are balls of ice and dust that orbit the sun in long elliptical orbits. Comet ZTF comes from the Oort cloud beyond the planets. It passed the sun in January and is now heading towards outer space. Comets move fast, but since they are far away, they seem to stand still when we view them.

Comet ZTF is difficult to see from Kenya, because: it is low in the north; you need binoculars or a telescope to see it unless you have a dark and clear night sky; and there's a waxing moon brightening the sky.

If you have a clear, dark sky, look for a hazy, blurry spot of light low in the north. Look near the bright star Capella in the constellation Auriga before dawn on February 1 or 2. Or try in the evening from Feb 6. The comet passes near the 'red planet' Mars on Feb 10-11

Planets, Feb '23

Venus is the bright light in the west after sunset. Jupiter, also bright, is higher in the west. On January 22, both Jupiter and the crescent moon appear to be near Venus – a beautiful sight. Venus (orbiting between the sun and the Earth) rises higher each night, while Jupiter dips lower. The two bright planets seem to pass each other on March first.

Mars, glowing orange but fading now, is high in the west. It's near Comet ZTF on Feb 10-11, and near the half-lit moon on the 27th and 28th. Saturn sinks in the sunset glare, to reappear before sunrise at month's end.

At dawn, small but bright Mercury is above the sunrise. The slim, waning crescent moon is near Mercury on Feb 19. Saturn reappears in the east, rises, and passes Mercury on March first.

Glorious February Stars

In the evening, look east, with your back to the sunset. Sirius, the brightest star of the night, is in the southeast. (The sun is of course our brightest star by day). The second brightest star, Canopus, is to the right of Sirius, in the southern sky. Further west, low in the southwest, is the bright star Achernar.

The constellation Orion, the Hunter or Warrior of Greek myths, is almost overhead, above and north (left) of Sirius. Look for three bright stars in a row. To the ancient Greeks, this was Orion's belt. They saw the three fainter stars in a row, at a right angle to his belt, as his sword. Four bright stars represent Orion's shoulders and knees. The star Rigel, blue-green in colour, is one knee. The orange star Betelgeuse is one shoulder, on the other side of the 3-star belt.

The ancient Greeks imagined two dogs following the Hunter – Sirius and Procyon. Procyon is a bright star east of Orion, left of Sirius.

To the north (left) of Orion, the reddish star Aldebaran is at one end of a cone-shaped group of stars, the Hyades cluster. A larger cluster of stars, further north, is the Pleiades or Seven Sisters. The moon seems near the Pleiades on February 26, and near reddish Mars and reddish Aldebaran on the 27th.

With binoculars, you can see the great nebula M42 in Orion's sword, and the glow around the stars of the Seven Sisters and Hyades cluster. In a dark location away from urban lights, you can look for the faint star cluster M41 near bright Sirius.

Lower in the northern sky, five bright stars form a giant pentagon. This is part of the constellation of Auriga, the Charioteer of the ancient Greeks. The brightest of the five is the star Capella – which is actually two stars that appear to us as one. Between Auriga and the star Procyon is the long, narrow constellation of Gemini, the Twins.

Sirius, Canopus, Rigel, Capella, Procyon, Achernar and Betelgeuse are among the ten brightest stars in the night sky.

Moon, Feb 2023

Feb 5 – full moon. Feb 13 – last quarter. Feb 20 – new moon. Feb 27 – first quarter.

Birding Updates

Wednesday Morning Birdwalks in Nairobi

Please observe Covid-19 protocols as needed: wear or bring masks and meet at designated venues.

1st February – Waterbird Counts at Ruiru. From city centre, take Thika road, get off at Eastern Bypass and drive back towards Nairobi on the service road. Meet at left turn labeled Northlands. For more information, write to news@naturekenya.org or phone 0780- 149200

8th February – Paradise Lost with the waterbird counts. Meet at Paradise Lost Main Gate at 8:30 am. Directions: From city centre, take Kiambu Road. Turn Left at Paradise Lost junction in Thindigua after Runda Greens, before Quick Mart Supermarket. Turn right at Kencom Apartments just after Kasarini Primary School. It's about 500m to the main gate. Thanks to the management for welcoming the birdwalk.

15th February – Karen Blixen Museum. Meet at 8.30 am in the Museum's Car Park area. Directions: Coming from the city centre, take Ngong Road towards Karen. Turn left at Shell Petrol Station onto Karen Road. The Museum is about 1.5Kms after Karen Country Club.

22nd February – Nairobi Arboretum. Meet at 8:30 am at the main entrance off State House Road. There is an entrance fee of Ksh.65 per person payable via Mpesa.

February 19th Sunday Bird Watch – Thika Sewage Treatment Works with the waterbird counts. Meet at 8.30 am at the Sewage Works gate. Directions: Driving along Garissa Road, turn right at BAT. Turn left at the T-junction, turn right where the tarmac ends. Turn left at Full Gospel Church Sign post (Opposite P.C.E.A.), turn left at Kiganjo Primary School gate. Take the first right turn and drive ahead to the Sewage Works gate.

If you have questions, please write < news@naturekenya.org> or phone 0780-149200.

Tentative February 2023 Waterbird Counts on the Rift Valley lakes:

Lake Nakuru February 4

Lake Elmentaita February 5

If you would like to take part; if you are experienced in identifying and counting waterbirds and if you can meet the group at the site or provide a 4x4 for transport, please contact Ireene Madindou at <ilhanmadindou@gmail.com> or phone 0701-028739.

Bird Ringing at Nairobi National Museum grounds usually take place on Tuesday mornings. Please confirm with Titus Imboma <Imbomati911@gmail.com> Phone 0721-649452.

Thursday Birdwalks in Malindi

2nd February – Malindi Harbour. Meet at **9:00 am** at the Malindi Museum near Nature Kenya Membership Office (celebrating World Wetlands Day).

9th February– Sabaki Bridge. Meet at 4:00 pm at the Malindi Museum near Nature Kenya Membership Office .

16th February – Mtangani via Afya Hospital. Meet at 4:00 pm at Malindi Museum (100/= Boda boda fare to and from)

23rd February - Mayungu. Meet at 4:00pm at Malindi Museum (100/= Boda boda fare to and from)

Saturday Bird Watch

25th February - Lake Jilore. Meet at the Malindi Museum at 7:00 am; the bird walk is likely to last about 3 hours (Bring drinking water).

For more information, email: <malindimembers@naturekenya.org > or phone 0725223042.

Coast February 2023 Waterbird Counts

Waterfowl counts are on **Friday 3rd** February and **Saturday 4th** February at Saltpans, Sabaki, Mikimba, Jilore, Chemchem, Mbaratum and Malindi harbour.

If you would like to take part; if you are experienced in identifying and counting waterbirds; and if you can meet the group at the site or provide a vehicle for transport, please contact: Amina Simba <malindimembers@naturekenya.org > / 0725223042 or Lennox Kirao Lennox.kirao@arocha.org / 0738575431

Mombasa Birdwalks are held the 3rd Saturday of each month. To check meeting time and place, check Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/FFJmombasa/>
Or contact: Taibali Hamzali <thamzali@gmail.com> / 0733-980540
or Kelvin Mazera <klvnrua@yahoo.com> / 0720-928783

SECOND NATIONAL CRANE CENSUS

The **Kenya Cranes Working Group** is planning for a 2nd countrywide census of Grey Crowned Crane that will take place from **28 Feb** to **12 March 2023**. Volunteers may send their observations and/or inquiries to **Dr. Wanyoike Wamiti <wwamiti@gmail.com>** and **Dr. Maurice Ogoma <mauriceo@savingcranes.org>**

The following data/info would be sufficient: **date, locality** *(name of the site; GPS good too)*, **number of young cranes** *(chicks and sub-adults without bright red markings on the head/face)*, **number of adult cranes, habitat type** *(wetland, cropland, grassland)* and **name of the observer(s)** - *to be acknowledged in the report.*

Your participation will be highly appreciated.

Yes! Start my **Nature**Kenya membership

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For details on associated groups such as Youth Committee, Succulenta, and Friends of Nairobi Arboretum, City Park or Arabuko-Sokoke Forest, contact office@naturekenya.org